

Home Alone, How Young is Too Young?
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Ann, a New Hampshire mom has a confession. This past summer, she left her seven year old daughter at home for a few minutes, while she walked her son to a friend's house exactly three doors down for a play date. During her brisk walk to and from the neighbor's, her conscious started churning. "Are you sure this is the right choice, what if something happens while you are away for those precious moments?" Heart thumping, she ran back home, yanked the front door open, and there her daughter sat in the exact same spot, watching television. (Yes, square eyed gaze and all, another article altogether...) Ann admonished herself, and wondered if the convenience factor was worth taking the chance leaving a seven year old unattended no matter how little time it was. Whether you leave a child home without supervision for a few minutes, or decide to run into the store for a quick gallon of milk, what is the answer to that crucial question?

The Law

The U.S Child Department of Health and Human Services (<http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/homealone.cfm>) maintains that leaving your child home unattended could be perceived as neglect if it places them in danger. However, according to the National Child Care Safety Information Center, just Illinois and Maryland have age limit laws. So without clear cut regulations, how do you determine what the right choice is?

Regardless of the guidelines some states have in place, Sandra Beaudry, Program Director for Family Counseling and Adolescent Substance Abuse Treatment Programs with Child and Family Services in New Hampshire advises each child needs to be evaluated on an individual basis to determine their trustworthiness. "You might have a 16 year old that gets into a lot of trouble and needs supervision, while someone younger may be just fine on their own with the right preparation."

Home Alone Responsibility Are Your Kids Ready?

Beaudry recommends the following guidelines to help determine *when and if* it is okay to leave a child at home.

- Where do you live? Are neighbors close by and accessible?
- Is there anything happening in the neighborhood that would affect the situation?
- Ask your child how they feel about being home alone. Maybe they are scared or just not ready yet.
- Think about safety and responsibility. Do you have a child that is helpful with chores, do they complete their homework? Are they generally cooperative, or have they done something that would put them at risk?
- How does your child handle unexpected situations and are they adaptable? Such as do they understand first aid and know to stay away from strangers.

Make a Plan

With these guidelines in place you can begin to prepare your children to be alone responsibly. Beaudry recommends parents work up to being away for 30 minutes at a time and to conduct practice runs. "See how the child handles the situation before you spend longer periods of time away. Have an older child come over and play video games for example, so it's not as if they are babysitting but rather just hanging out. "The key point is there is a lot of preparation involved and both the child and parent need to feel ready," points out Beaudry.

Once you have reached a mutual decision with your child and reviewed the rules of being home alone, establish some safety precautions.

- Advise your child on what is safe to do, and child proof your home. Lock up all the stuff they shouldn't be touching.
- Register your child for a babysitting class. This is where they learn basic first aid, and general rules of taking care of the house. The American Red Cross in Manchester offers these classes for ages 11-16. Visit www.redcross.org to find your local chapter and a list of class offerings.

- Know the rules, emergency numbers, and where to find safety devices such as flashlights.
- As a parent, call home and periodically check in on the kids.

Home Alone Too Much

While preparing kids to be trustworthy and teaching them to be on their own is key, too much alone time can also be problematic. “Sometimes children left unattended too often may not follow direction when you are present to set boundaries,” states Beaudry. A way to avoid this trap is to enroll kids in after school programs. Create scenarios where they can be involved in other activities, be around other people, or select a day where you come home early. “This could be a chance to spend one on one time doing activities with your child and keeping the focus on them. Do something they have already mastered, so they know someone cares about them. It could be making them a special snack or breakfast for example.”

The Car Question

Kids hanging out in the car during errands can also be risky as they are exposed in public and unexpected delays may be encountered while you are away. A few minutes can turn into much longer when you least expect it. Beaudry offers the following guidelines to consider in this situation.

- Think about trust. “Can I trust you to be alone for a minute while I do this?”
- Consider safety issues. There should be no car running and no doors unlocked.
- Know your own child, your surroundings, and make the best judgment you can.

Bottom Line

Kids need to learn independence and being home alone at an appropriate age, when prepared properly can be okay. “If a child is in doubt about decision making, they should be able to reach a parent who can help make a decision especially when it comes to letting someone in the house. Don’t tell anyone you are home alone,” states Beaudry. “As parents we are always doing something we are crossing our fingers with – you don’t want to say no all the time, at the same time, we have to protect them, so striking the balance is key.”